Leaders' Meeting on refugee flows along the Western Balkans Route

Leaders' Statement

At the invitation of the President of the European Commission, the Heads of State or Government of Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia, in the presence of the President of the European Parliament, the President of the European Council, the current and incoming Presidencies of the Council of the EU as well as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), agreed the following statement:

"The unprecedented flow of refugees and migrants along the Eastern Mediterranean-Western Balkans route is a challenge that will not be solved through national actions alone. Only a determined, collective cross-border approach in a European spirit, based on solidarity, responsibility, and pragmatic cooperation between national, regional and local authorities can succeed. Unilateral action may trigger a chain reaction. Countries affected should therefore talk to each other. Neighbours should work together along the route, as well as upstream with countries such as Turkey, as host to the largest number of refugees. This is the only way to restore stability to the management of migration in the region, ease the pressure on the over-stretched capacity of the countries most affected, and to slow down the flows.

All countries have responsibilities and obligations under international law, in particular the Geneva Convention, and EU Member States have to fully respect EU law. Refugees need to be treated in a humane manner along the length of the Western Balkans route to avoid a humanitarian tragedy in Europe. Migrants who are not in need of international protection should be swiftly returned to their countries of origin.

We welcome the readiness of the European Commission, the UNHCR, Frontex and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), in accordance with their respective mandates, to support us in the swift implementation of the following operational measures as of Monday:

Permanent exchange of information and effective cooperation

1/ We will nominate contact points reporting directly to us to facilitate the exchange of information and coordination; we will nominate these contact points within 24 hours to allow daily exchanges and coordination to begin immediately to achieve the gradual, controlled and orderly movement of persons along the Western Balkans route;

2/ We will work with the European Commission to make use of all tools available at European and international level, including financial assistance, based on joint needs assessments to be launched within 24 hours; immediate efforts should be focused on the provision of temporary shelter and support for all arrivals as well as on organising swift and effective returns of migrants not in need of international protection.

Limiting Secondary Movements

3/ Under the current circumstances, we will discourage the movement of refugees or migrants to the border of another country of the region. A policy of waving through refugees without informing a neighbouring country is not acceptable. This should apply to all countries along the route.

Supporting refugees and providing shelter and rest

4/ We commit to increasing the capacity of our countries to provide temporary shelter, rest, food, health, water and sanitation to all in need. Where these fall short, we commit to make our needs clear to the European Commission and, where appropriate, to trigger the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Sufficient temporary accommodation should then be ensured along the Western Balkans route. We commit to immediately exchange information about our capacity to provide shelter to ensure its optimal shared and coordinated use, where requested;

5/ We welcome Greece's intention to increase reception capacity to 30.000 places by the end of the year and commit to supporting Greece and UNHCR to provide rent subsidies and host family programmes for at least 20.000 more. Financial support for Greece and the UNHCR is expected. This is an important precondition to make the emergency relocation system work;

6/ We will work with the UNHCR who has committed to support our efforts in improving our capacities. An additional capacity of 50.000 would allow for a better and more predictable management of the flow. We request that the UNHCR support be strengthened immediately in particular as regards reception capacity and the provision of humanitarian support. We will work with EASO on an exchange of information in this regard;

7/ We will engage in immediate operational contacts with International Financial Institutions such as the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Development Bank of the Council of Europe which are ready to support financially efforts to provide shelter of the countries willing to make use of these resources. We commit to engaging with these International Financial Institutions to act in a coordinated manner. We welcome the readiness of the European Commission to call a coordination meeting with these International Financial Institutions within a week.

Managing the migration flows together

8/ We will ensure a full capacity to register arrivals, with maximum use of biometric data, notably fingerprints; this is vital in particular at the point of first entry into the EU. Registration does not replace the obligation for EU Member States of mandatory registration in line with the common European asylum system rules;

9/ We will immediately exchange information via the contact points on the size and movement of flows through our countries, in particular the number of refugees and migrants belonging to vulnerable groups, and where requested on all arriving refugees and migrants on our territories;

10/ We will work with EU agencies in particular Frontex and EASO to swiftly put in place this exchange of information; these EU agencies are invited to provide technical assistance in this endeavour and to advise on the information to be exchanged and on the frequency of exchanges;

11/ We commit to step up our national and coordinated efforts to swiftly return migrants not in need of international protection in full respect of their dignity and human rights. This is vital in particular at the point of first entry into the EU. Frontex and EASO are invited to provide technical assistance;

12/ We will work with the European Commission and Frontex to step up practical cooperation on readmission with third countries; cooperation will be intensified with Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, in particular in the area of returns. We call for full implementation of the existing readmission agreements. We invite the European Commission to

start working on readmission agreements with relevant countries with which such agreements are not yet in place.

Border Management

13/ We commit to immediately increase our efforts to manage and regain control of our borders and increase the coordination of our actions relating to border management. This will include our strong support to the following measures to be decided and agreed in the relevant institutions and in accordance with the relevant procedures:

- Working closely with Turkey to finalise and implement the EU-Turkey Action Plan;
- Making full use of the potential of the EU-Turkey readmission agreement and the visa liberalisation roadmap;
- Upscaling the Poseidon Sea Joint Operation in Greece, in particular Frontex's presence in the Aegean Sea, and strengthening significantly Frontex support to Greece in registering and fingerprinting activities;
- Reinforcing Frontex support at the border between Bulgaria and Turkey;
- Immediate bilateral border-related confidence-building measures, in particular the strengthening of border cooperation, between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;
- Greece, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania will strengthen the management of the external land border. Frontex should assist Greece in the registration of refugees and migrants who have not yet been registered in the country;
- Increased UNHCR engagement at the border between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;
- Working together with Frontex to monitor border crossings and support registration at Croatian-Serbian border crossing points;
- Strengthening the Frontex Western Balkans Risk Analysis Network with intensified reporting from all participants;
- The deployment in Slovenia within a week of 400 police officers and essential equipment through bilateral support;

Where appropriate, countries will make use of the Rapid Border Intervention Team (RABIT) mechanism, which should be duly equipped;

14/ We reconfirm the principle that a country may refuse entry to third country nationals who, when presenting themselves at border crossing points, do not confirm a wish to apply for international protection (in line with international and EU refugee law, subject to a prior *non-refoulement* and proportionality check).

Tackling smuggling and trafficking

15/ We commit to enhance police and judicial cooperation and to step up actions against migrant smuggling and trafficking of human beings. We call on Europol, Frontex and Interpol to support Western Balkans route-wide operations to combat people smuggling.

Information on the rights and obligations of refugees and migrants

16/ In order to discourage perilous journeys and recourse to smugglers, we commit to make use of all available communication tools to inform refugees and migrants about existing rules, as well as about their rights and obligations, notably on the consequences of a refusal to be registered, fingerprinted and of a refusal to seek protection where they are. We call on the UNHCR to support national authorities in this regard.

Monitoring

17/ We invite the European Commission to monitor the implementation of these commitments on a weekly basis, in coordination with the national contact points."